



Welcome

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Welcome to the fifth issue of *Victorian Popular Fictions*, the third general issue, and the third issue published under the effects of the COVID19 pandemic. The regularity with which our contributors, reviewers (8 and 5 respectively in this issue) and we have maintained the sequence of publication may suggest our quick normalisation of crisis, our rapid adoption of a coping system which is a variant of the kind we have read about in Stephens 2020: just as we have come to think of political scandal as inevitable and everyday – as “normal” – so researching and writing and publishing when access to archives and libraries is high impossible also risks seeming the norm. Yet, as Stephens noted, in our everyday chat we and the media posit a future normal – “when will things get back to normal?” we ask, often without thinking too closely about whether what “normal” was will be really good for us in the long term. That refusal to think of what “normal” was, is, will or might be is not one of our characteristics.

Continuity in our case does not mean normalisation in the sense Stephens and others use it. How could we be “normal” anyway? We published only two issues in the “normal” golden times before the pandemic, and from the outset we said, without using these exact words, that we did not wish this journal to be normal or normalising. We had decided that our “normal” would be an energetic search to think about what “Victorian Popular Fictions” might be. That means that our “normal” is not a statement or a state which we want nostalgically to get back to, but an energy, a movement, a force, with uncertain boundaries and shifting directions. Our punctuation mark is not the full stop but the question mark. As students of the popular we are not “normal.” We are not comfortable insiders to academia, but neither are we outsiders: we constantly negotiate our positions on the margins, both inside and out, our teetering and precarious positions enabling us to enjoy, we hope, that “special lucidity” that Bourdieu (1996:47) attributed to Flaubert and others of his social group.

To enact and not just state our discomfort with the “normal,” we make a feature out of a polemical first article in each issue. We do that again here with a piece that asks important questions about value and about collaboration (a mode of working explored in very different ways by [Cozzi](#) and [Sheldon](#)). Rather than focus on discussion of content through close or distant reading, [Janine Hatter and Helena Ifill](#) instead take us behind the scenes of a book series they edit, *Key Popular Women Writers*, that has published its first five volumes all on Victorian popular women writers. They focus on practice itself and the implications of that practice. Not only raising questions of value – always a central concern of the “popular” – Hatter and Ifill place literally at the centre of their piece accounts by authors of the first five volumes in the series of the very different motivations behind, and the histories and constraints they faced in publishing their work. While [Hatter and Ifill](#) use the term “field” a great deal, they use it to

denominate a shared space between their readers and themselves rather than a fenced off area. Theirs is a force field that propels - intersectional feminism devoted to equality of representation (p. 27) - not a static, hedged or policed zone. For that reason, I think we should read the title of the piece (“Making Space”) as a verb indicating work in constant progress rather than as finished achievement: the books may be out, but activity does not stop there.

The action they and the authors in their series describe comprises constant and intense dialogue between Victorian women writers and today’s scholars, including the lessons for personal growth that such a dialogue offers. While some of our readers may find such admissions embarrassing, many others, we know, will take it as “normal.” Common now, such dialogues have a very distinct history stemming from feminisms which sought to validate non-patriarchal knowledges, including affective response. Only 40 years ago, language such as this, which is echoed by the series authors, was not normal at all. It was scandalous.

Woolf inspired me to find ... myself. I am not sure how she conferred this gift of self-recovery ... Time and again, students, writing with grateful astonishment of the ways Woolf enhances and deepens their lives, remind me of this mysterious gift of authenticity Woolf confers.

Ruddick, 1981: 186

Like Ruddick’s students and Ruddick herself, the authors confess to the effects of such a dialogue with their subjects and hope that their students will likewise find the “gift of self-recovery” in their subjects. [Hatter and Ifill](#) propose it as a relationship to texts available for nineteenth-century readers too. What is unusual in their piece, though, is the detail of the *different* kinds of dialogue that the authors of the series engage in when they write. At times, the dialogue involves the symbolic nature of material objects (Sanders and Lambert both emphasise this) or a political commitment to justice fuelled by a rage at the selectivity of our educations (especially legible in Costantini). At other times we read of wonder at the contrasts between writing practices then and now. Goose quills may have been replaced by laptops, but it is the productivity of Victorian women writers that really continues to amaze and chasten.

The business acumen so apparent in the subjects of the research may not be emphasised by all of the researchers as essential today, but, if the popular be agreed as founded on wide circulation of literary products in a society founded on capitalist industry (as Hatter and Ifill propose), then it is essential to consider a writer’s relation to business, and, indeed, our own relationship to it. Victorian authors’ attention to the market is certainly very visible in [Cozzi](#), [Moulds](#), [Sheldon](#), [Burz-Labrande](#) and [Mills](#) below, and we are to some extent used to that. But one of Hatter and Ifill’s most shocking reminders is how the market operates today to regulate our own research and its dissemination. As they highlight, the equality of representation they strive for is constrained by the market: if a “Popular Woman Writer” is not well-known enough today to be considered likely to result in a return on the investment of publication, then volume-form research on her is unlikely to be published – at least through traditional profit-oriented publishing channels.¹

What fuels many of the articles in this number is the tension between women and between men. [Cozzi](#) compares and contrast two gendered forms of collaboration: the one between women bears out [Hatter and Ifill](#)’s notion of collaboration as shared space while the other, between men, is much more antagonistic: Besant seems intent on excluding his writing

¹ Hatter and Ifill tactfully omit the not-for-profit alternatives such as Open Book Publishers used by Andrew Hobbs (whose *A Fleet Street in Every Town* is reviewed in this issue), crowd-funded publication such as through Kickstarter (which returns us to the subscription model of the eighteenth century) or, indeed, this very journal funded by subscription to the VPFA and the free collaborative labour of its contributors and editors.

partner from the field. [Nash](#)'s ensuing piece on J. M. Barrie's previously unstudied short story "The Body in the Black Box" in this context reads as an uncanny and murderous exaggeration of the inability of men to get on with each other. [Nash](#)'s use of psychoanalysis almost suggests that Barrie is implying that it is in men's nature not to co-operate: the repressed must return but each side lives in his walled and windowed zones; boundaries are crossed only to kill. [Sigley](#), though, is keen to show how three stories by George Egerton present women in positive and productive transactions with each other comprising "tactile exchange" which contrast to various degrees of explicitness with the exploitative touches of men, while [Moulds](#) shows how a woman doctor-detective rescues a fellow woman from a murderous male colleague in a story written by a student of medicine herself, Anna Kingsford. The heroine upholds the ethics of the medical profession, though as [Moulds](#) points out, men do behave professionally in the story too. [Sheldon](#)'s is the first of two pieces on Grant Allen in this issue. She reads *Miss Cayley's Adventures* through locating it in its original publication format in *The Strand* and thus as a text that blends, as *The Strand* famously aimed to do, words and images on every page. While she does not suggest a collaboration between Allen and his illustrator Gordon Browne themselves, she does demonstrate how to read a story "sideways" (as Linda Hughes famously put it in 2014) and therefore how different forms of text collaborate to generate a meaning for the reader. [Burz-Labrande](#) offers similar in her discussion of Edward Lloyd's *People's Periodical and Family Friend* (where *The String of Pearls* first appeared – analysis of which much-studied text she is careful to avoid), though the enterprise of her piece as a whole is rather to remind us of the energetic class antagonism – which was also an intense market rivalry – that underlies all nineteenth-century popular culture. [Mills](#) returns us to Grant Allen and again shows how two different kinds of text work together in his *oeuvre*, but this time two genres each with seemingly different contracts with the reader: the fictional and the scientific. In this, her article can productively be read in dialogue with [Moulds](#)'s discussion which similarly demonstrates how to untangle the generic threads of a text. [Mills](#) begins, however, with a quotation drawn from a letter from H. G. Wells to Allen which shows, if not men collaborating, at least a man acknowledging the rightful place of another in the "field."

The question remains, however: how "normal" are the kinds of collaboration described here, and how far do they represent a response to crisis? In some cases evidently not, but in others that is not so clear. If they are or might, for whom, when, in what field and to what end is this "normal" collaboration, and, crucially, what are our affective responses to it?

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